

So I believe in friendliness and an open ear. For me, it starts with making eye contact when I pour coffee and ask my customers, "How you doing?" and then listen to their answer.

My job is to take care of customers at the counter in a small Texas diner, but I also believe we're in this world to take care of each other.

IVORY HARLOW began working as a waitress after a tour of duty in the U.S. Air Force. She is studying for a bachelor's degree in business administration. Harlow lives in San Antonio with her husband and dog, and she enjoys writing poems and nonfiction.

Do What You Love

TONY HAWK

I BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE SHOULD TAKE PRIDE in what they do, even if it is scorned or misunderstood by the public at large.

I have been a professional skateboarder for twenty-four years. For much of that time, the activity that paid my rent and gave me my greatest joy was tagged with many labels, most of which were ugly. It was a kids' fad, a waste of time, a dangerous pursuit, a crime.

When I was about seventeen, three years after I turned pro, my high school "careers" teacher scolded me in front of the entire class about jumping ahead in my workbook. He told me that I would never make it in the workplace if I

didn't follow directions explicitly. Hé said I'd never make a living as a skateboarder, so it seemed to *him* that my future was bleak.

Even during those dark years, I never stopped riding my skateboard and never stopped progressing as a skater. There have been many, many times when I've been frustrated because I can't land a maneuver. I've come to realize that the only way to master something is to keep at it—despite the bloody knees, despite the twisted ankles, despite the mocking crowds.

Skateboarding has gained mainstream recognition in recent years, but it still has negative stereotypes. The pro skaters I know are responsible members of society. Many of them are fathers, homeowners, world travelers, and successful entrepreneurs. Their hairdos and tattoos are simply part of our culture, even when they raise eyebrows during PTA meetings.

So here I am, thirty-eight years old, a husband and father of three, with a lengthy list of responsibilities and obligations. And although I have many job titles—CEO, Executive Producer, Senior Consultant, Foundation Chairman, Bad Actor—the one I am most proud of is Professional Skateboarder. It's the one I write on surveys and customs forms, even though I often end up in a secondary security checkpoint.

My youngest son's preschool class was recently asked

what their dads do for work. The responses were things like, "My dad sells money" and "My dad figures stuff out." My son said, "I've never seen my dad do work."

It's true. Skateboarding doesn't seem like real work, but I'm proud of what I do. My parents never once questioned the practicality behind my passion, even when I had to scrape together gas money and regarded dinner at Taco Bell as a big night out.

I hope to pass on the same lesson to my children someday. Find the thing you love. My oldest son is an avid skater and he's really gifted for a thirteen-year-old, but there's a lot of pressure on him. He used to skate for endorsements, but now he brushes all that stuff aside. He just skates for fun and that's good enough for me.

You might not make it to the top, but if you are doing what you love, there is much more happiness there than being rich or famous.

TONY HAWK got his first skateboard when he was nine years old. Five years later, he turned pro. Hawk's autobiography and video games have been bestsellers, while his foundation has funded skate-park construction in low-income communities across America.

The Learning Curve of Gratitude

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER

I BELIEVE IN WHAT I LEARNED AT the grocery store.

Eight weeks ago I was released from the hospital after suffering a pulmonary embolism. I had just finished a tour and a week after returning home, severe chest pain and terrible breathlessness landed me in the ER. A scan revealed blood clots in my lungs.

Everyone told me how lucky I was. A pulmonary embolism can take your life in an instant. I was familiar enough with the medical term, but not familiar with the pain, the fear, and the depression that followed.

Everything I had been looking forward to came to a

screaching halt. I had to cancel my upcoming tour. I had to let my musicians and crewmembers go. The record company, the booking agency: I felt that I had let everyone down. But there was nothing to do but get out of the hospital, go home, and get well.

I tried hard to see my unexpected time off as a gift, but I would open a novel and couldn't concentrate. I would turn on the radio, then shut it off. Familiar clouds gathered above my head, and I couldn't make them go away with a pill or a movie or a walk. This unexpected time was becoming a curse, filling me with anxiety, fear, and self-loathing—all of the ingredients of the darkness that is depression.

Sometimes, it's the smile of a stranger that helps. Sometimes it's a phone call from a long-absent friend, checking on you. I found my lifeline at the grocery store.

One morning, the young man who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I sat in my car and cried.

What I want more than ever is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow, and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the learning curve of gratitude.

I don't want to say "have a nice day" like a robot. I don't

want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don't want to go crazy when my Internet access is messed up. I don't want to be jealous of someone else's success. You could say that this litany of sins indicates that I don't want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am.

I don't know if my doctors will ever be able to give me the precise reason why I had a life-threatening illness. I do know that the young man in the grocery store reminded me that every day is all there is, and that is my belief.

Tonight I will cook dinner, tell my husband how much I love him, curl up with the dogs, watch the sun go down over the mountains, and climb into bed. I will think about how uncomplicated it all is. I will wonder at how it took me my entire life to appreciate just one day.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER is a five-time Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter. She has produced eleven albums in her twenty-year career, including *The Calling*, released in 2007. Carpenter and her husband live near Charlottesville, Virginia.

Failure Is a Good Thing

JON CARROLL

LAST WEEK MY GRANDDAUGHTER STARTED KINDERGARTEN, AND, as is conventional, I wished her success. I was lying. What I actually wish for her is failure. I believe in the power of failure.

Success is boring. Success is proving that you can do something that you already know you can do, or doing something correctly the first time, which can often be a problematic victory. First-time success is usually a fluke. First-time failure, by contrast, is expected; it is the natural order of things.

Failure is how we learn. I have been told of an African

phrase describing a good cook as "she who has broken many pots." If you've spent enough time in the kitchen to have broken a lot of pots, probably you know a fair amount about cooking. I once had a late dinner with a group of chefs, and they spent time comparing knife wounds and burn scars. They knew how much credibility their failures gave them.

I earn my living by writing a daily newspaper column. Each week I am aware that one column is going to be the worst column of the week. I don't set out to write it; I try my best every day. Still, every week, one column is inferior to all the others, sometimes spectacularly so.

I have learned to cherish that column. A successful column usually means I am treading on familiar ground, going with the tricks that work, preaching to the choir, or dressing up popular sentiments in fancy words. Often in my inferior columns, I am trying to pull off something I've never done before, something I'm not even sure can be done.

My younger daughter is a trapeze artist. She spent three years putting together an act. She did it successfully for a decade with the Cirque du Soleil. There was no reason for her to change the act—but she did anyway. She said she was no longer learning anything new and she was bored; and if she was bored, there was no point in subjecting her body to all that stress. So she changed the act. She risked failure and

profound public embarrassment in order to feed her soul. And if she can do that fifteen feet in the air, we all should be able to do it.

My granddaughter is a perfectionist, probably too much of one. She will feel her failures, and I will want to comfort her. But I will also, I hope, remind her of what she learned, and how she can do whatever it is better next time. I probably won't tell her that failure is a good thing, because that's not a lesson you can learn when you're five. I hope I can tell her, though, that it's not the end of the world. Indeed, with luck, it is the beginning.

JON CARROLL started at the San Francisco Chronicle editing the crossword puzzle and writing TV listings. He has been a columnist for the paper since 1982. Carroll has also held editorial positions at Rolling Stone, the Village Voice, and other publications.

honor, then we could be proud of ourselves. We could serve causes greater than our own self-interest.

Years later, I saw an example of honor in the most surprising of places. As a scared American prisoner of war in Vietnam, I was tied in torture ropes by my tormentors and left alone in an empty room to suffer through the night. Later in the evening, a guard I had never spoken to entered the room and silently loosened the ropes to relieve my suffering. Just before morning, that same guard came back and retightened the ropes before his less humanitarian comrades returned. He never said a word to me. Some months later on a Christmas morning, as I stood alone in the prison courtyard, that same guard walked up to me and stood next to me for a few moments. Then, with his sandal, the guard drew a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly there for a minute or two, venerating the cross, until the guard rubbed it out and walked away.

To me, that was faith: a faith that unites and never divides, a faith that bridges unbridgeable gaps in humanity. It is the faith that we are all equal and endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is a faith I would die to defend.

My determination to act with honor and integrity impels me to work in service to my country. I have believed that the means to real happiness and the true worth of a

The Virtues of the Quiet Hero

JOHN MCCAIN

I BELIEVE IN HONOR, FAITH, AND SERVICE—to one's country and to mankind. It's a lesson I learned from my family, from the men with whom I served in Vietnam, and from my fellow Americans.

Take William B. Ravnel. He was in Patton's tank corps that went across Europe. I knew him, though, as an English teacher and football coach in my school. He could make Shakespeare come alive, and he had incredible leadership talents that made me idolize him. What he taught me more than anything else was to strictly adhere to our school's honor code. If we stuck to those standards of integrity and

person is measured by how faithfully we serve a cause greater than our self-interest. In America, we celebrate the virtues of the quiet hero—the modest man who does his duty without complaint or expectation of praise; the man who listens closely for the call of his country, and when she calls, he answers without reservation, not for fame or reward, but for love.

I have been an imperfect servant of my country, and my mistakes rightly humble me. I have tried to live by these principles of honor, faith, and service because I want my children to live by them as well. I hope to be a good example to them so that when their generation takes our place, they will make better decisions and continue to pave the path toward righteousness and freedom.

JOHN MCCAIN is the son and grandson of U.S. Navy admirals. After graduating from Annapolis as a naval aviator, McCain was shot down over North Vietnam and spent five years as a prisoner of war. He has been a U.S. senator from Arizona since 1986 and ran for president in 2000.

The Joy and Enthusiasm of Reading

RICK MOODY

I BELIEVE IN THE ABSOLUTE AND UNLIMITED liberty of reading. I believe in wandering through the stacks and picking out the first thing that strikes me. I believe in choosing books based on the dust jacket. I believe in reading books because others dislike them or find them dangerous. I believe in choosing the hardest book imaginable. I believe in reading up on what others have to say about this difficult book, and then making up my own mind.

Part of this has to do with Mr. Buxton, who taught me Shakespeare in tenth grade. We were reading *Macbeth*. Mr. Buxton, who probably had better things to do, nonetheless

only once. I will see things as inconceivable to me today as a moon shot was to my grandfather when he was sixteen, or the Internet to my father when he was sixteen.

Ever since I was a little kid, whenever I've had a lousy day, my dad would put his arm around me and promise me that "tomorrow will be a better day." I challenged my father once: "How do you know that?" He said, "I just do." I believed him. My great-grandparents believed that, and my grandparents, and so do I.

As I listened to my dad talking that night, so worried about what the future holds for me and my generation, I wanted to put my arm around him and tell him what he always told me, "Don't worry, Dad. Tomorrow will be a better day." This, I believe.

JOSH RITTENBERG attends Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School in Manhattan, where he plays baseball and guitar and sings tenor in an a cappella group. Inspired by the TV show Law and Order, Rittenberg cofounded his school's Mock Trial Club. Newsday published an essay he wrote about excessive homework.

Free Minds and Hearts at Work

JACKIE ROBINSON,

AS FEATURED IN THE 1950S SERIES

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD SERIES OF 1947, I experienced a completely new emotion, when the national anthem was played. This time, I thought, it is being played for me, as much as for anyone else. This is organized major-league baseball, and I am standing here with all the others; and everything that takes place includes me.

About a year later, I went to Atlanta, Georgia, to play in an exhibition game. On the field, for the first time in Atlanta, there were Negroes and whites. Other Negroes, besides me. And I thought: What I have always believed has come to be.

And what is it that I have always believed? First, that

imperfections are human. But that wherever human beings were given room to breathe and time to think, those imperfections would disappear, no matter how slowly. I do *not* believe that we have found or even approached perfection. That is not necessarily in the scheme of human events. Handicaps, stumbling blocks, prejudices—all of these are imperfect. Yet, they have to be reckoned with because *they* are in the scheme of human events.

Whatever obstacles I found made me fight all the harder. But it would have been impossible for me to fight at all, except that I was sustained by the personal and deep-rooted belief that my fight had a chance. It had a chance because it took place in a free society. Not once was I forced to face and fight an immovable object. Not once was the situation so cast-iron rigid that I had no chance at all. Free minds and human hearts were at work all around me; and so there was the probability of improvement.

I look at my children now and know that I must still prepare them to meet obstacles and prejudices. But I can tell them, too, that they will never face *some* of these prejudices because other people have gone before them. And to myself I can say that, because progress is unalterable, many of today's dogmas will have vanished by the time they grow into adults. I can say to my children: There is a chance for you. No guarantee, but a chance.

And this chance has come to be, because there is nothing static with free people. There is no Middle Ages logic so strong that it can stop the human tide from flowing forward. I do *not* believe that every person, in every walk of life, can succeed in spite of any handicap. That would be perfection. But I do believe—and with every fiber in me—that what I was able to attain came to be because we put behind us (no matter how slowly) the dogmas of the past to discover the truth of today, and perhaps find the greatness of tomorrow.

I believe in the human race. I believe in the warm heart. I believe in man's integrity. I believe in the goodness of a free society. And I believe that the society can remain good only as long as we are willing to fight for it—and to fight against whatever imperfections may exist.

My fight was against the barriers that kept Negroes out of baseball. This was the area where I found imperfection, and where I was best able to fight. And I fought because I knew it was not doomed to be a losing fight. It couldn't be a losing fight—not when it took place in a free society.

And, in the largest sense, I believe that what I did was done for me—and that my faith in God sustained me in my fight. And that what was done for me must and will be done for others.